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SUBJECT: EUR/SCE DIRECTOR HOH'S VISIT EXTENSIVELY COVERED IN LOCAL MEDIA

REF: PODGORICA 91

¶1. (U) Summary: The Montenegrin print and electronic media extensively covered EUR/SCE Director Christopher Hoh's March 25-29 visit to Montenegro and his meetings with Montenegrin officials, as well with NGOs, religious leaders, and human rights figures. Hoh stressed the need for continued reform, USG satisfaction with its good relations with Montenegro, and support for the Ahtissari proposal on Kosovo. Hoh met directly with the press (public TV, and the four leading papers), on March 28. End summary.

¶2. (U) On March 28, Mr. Hoh met with PM Zeljko Sturanovic, Deputy PM for European Integration Gordana Djurovic, and Defense Minister Boro Vucinic. The press quoted Mr. Hoh as saying during the meetings that the "tradition of good relations between U.S. and Montenegro will continue and strengthen in line with the new status of Montenegro as an independent and sovereign state." He praised Montenegrin authorities for preserving peace and multiethnic harmony during the crisis in former SFRY and assessed as positive Montenegrin efforts to advance European and trans-Atlantic integration. Mr. Hoh also underscored the need for further reforms in the areas of labor legislation and the judiciary. The press noted that the USAID project for Montenegro's accession to the WTO, as well as other similar USG funded projects, have helped created a better business environment in the country.

¶3. (U) The Public Television of Montenegro (TVCG) aired a 15-minute interview with Mr. Hoh in its primetime news program on March 28. His interview with editors of the four daily newspapers conducted on March 28 at Podgorica's American Corner focused on the USG views of its relationship with Montenegro, in areas such as Kosovo, NATO, and fighting organized crime, corruption, and terrorism and resulted in frontpage stories in their March 29 editions.

¶4. (U) On Kosovo, the most influential newspaper "Vijesti" highlighted Hoh's satisfaction with the "responsible attitude" of Montenegrin authorities in respect of the Kosovo issue. Hoh noted that Montenegro has played an important role in the region in many cases, serving as an example in how to promote harmony and solve divisive issues like independence without escalating tensions.

Hoh added that he would not speculate about the upcoming UNSC decision on Kosovo, repeating that the U.S. supports the idea of supervised independence for Kosovo.

15. (U) State-owned "Pobjeda" noted Hoh's characterization of NATO as an alliance of democracies, with his advice that Montenegro take a "step by step" approach in joining the alliance. Anti-government "Dan" focused on Mr. Hoh's statement regarding the GoM's abilities to fight against organized crime and corruption, specifically his assessment that the GoM has an excellent anti-corruption program on paper but the real challenge is how this program will be implemented. The September 9, 2006, arrest of a dozen ethnic Albanians (including three American citizens) - a.k.a. "Eagle's Flight" remains a prominent local story, and journalists pressed Hoh about the role of the USG in the arrests. In reply, Hoh underscored the important role of the USG in providing consular assistance to the arrested Americans, which was the story carried by pro-government "Republika."

16. (U) The Public Television of Montenegro (TVCG) and private NTV Montena on March 27, as well as the daily newspapers "Pobjeda," "Dan," and "Republika" on March 28 reported on the sidescan sonar donated by the USG to the Regional Center for Underwater DeMining in Bijela. The press reported that the EUR/SCE director Christopher Hoh and Charge marked the entry into service of the sonar "and noted that the civilian Demining Center in Bijela was potentially a unique contribution by Montenegro to PfP and the NATO community."

17. (U) This cable was not cleared by EUR/SCE Hoh before his departure.

BARNES